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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000311

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SUBJECT: ITS FOUNDER JAILED IN BOMBING CAMPAIGN, A
BANGLADESH MADRASSA SAYS ALL IT WANTS IS PEACE, LOVE AND
(ISLAMIC) UNDERSTANDING

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a country proud of its moderate Muslim-majority heritage, a madrassa in Rajshahi is something of an outlier -- its founder is in jail on allegations of violent extremism while its students study a puritanical version of Islam foreign to most Bangladeshis. An Embassy Dhaka team recently visited the madrassa and received a warm welcome from students and its principal, who was jailed with the founder but later released. They made it clear they favor the Islamization of society, including the imposition of sharia law, but adamantly insisted they reject violence. The Embassy should develop a greater understanding of the madrassa and the many other student groups that belong to the puritanical Ahle Hadis Movement in Bangladesh to determine whether engagement, such as English-language study programs, would support USG goals to counter Islamic extremism. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Al-Markazul Islami As-Salafi Madrassa in Rajshahi is infamous for having a founder linked to violent Islamic extremist groups. The founder, Dr. Muhammad Asadullah Al Galib, remains in jail after his arrest in 2005 on allegations of masterminding a bombing campaign. He is the leader of the Ahle Hadis (also known as Ahle Hadith) movement in Bangladesh, which adheres to the puritanical teachings of Salafi Islam and is described by local media as a militant outfit although it is not banned. The madrassa was established in 1991 with support from the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage non-governmental organization, which is now banned from Bangladesh for suspected links to terrorism and has been the subject of Post reporting. Although the madrassa uses a government-approved curriculum, it uses supporting materials from the banned NGO, including at least one Arabic-language primer.

¶3. (SBU) An Embassy team visiting Rajshahi in mid-February received a warm welcome from students and the principal during an unannounced visit to Al-Markazul Islami As-Salafi Madrassa. The team was quickly surrounded by students who patiently answered questions and eagerly practiced their English, which though halting was better than typically heard in Bangladeshi schools. The students gladly posed for photos as did the principal, Abdus Samad Salafi, an elderly man with a wispy, henna-dyed beard who smiled sheepishly from beneath his Saudi red-and-white kafiya. Both he and the students insisted the school's founder had been falsely arrested; Principal Salafi himself had gone to jail with the founder

but said he was released after a year and a half when investigators couldn't find evidence to support the allegations.

14. (SBU) Throughout our visit to the school we were told that violence was against Islam and heard denunciations of militant Islamic groups that had, at least in the local media, been linked to the Ahle Hadis movement. Mohamad Mahbubur Rahman, the deputy commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police, said he did not consider the movement a security threat, noting that it always seeks permission from local authorities for its activities. Still, he acknowledged that its preaching of Salafi Islam could lead to violence because it is different from the Islam practiced by most Bangladeshis. There were some clashes over these differences before the State of Emergency was declared in January 2007, he said.

15. (SBU) The madrassa students insisted that Bangladeshis must become more pious and practice what they said was "true Islam," a reference to the Salafi movement to return the religion to its purest roots (Note: Salafi Islam is often referred to as "Wahhabi" and is often used to describe fundamentalist Islamic thought. End Note) The students were short on specifics, other than to say they supported sharia law. However the principal, who was educated in Karachi, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, said Islamic rule should include bans on charging interest and gambling, and a crackdown on corruption. He said that women should be allowed to work but under severe restrictions; they should not be allowed to work outside of offices and should observe "hijab," the rules regarding dress that usually require women to wear loose clothing that covers nearly their entire body. Each year a few students from the madrassa go to Saudi Arabia to further

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their education.

16. (SBU) The madrassa's fortunes clearly have been on the decline since the arrest of the founder, with the number of students down from as much as 600 to about 300. Ahle Hadis also supports a nationwide youth organization active in 42 of Bangladesh's 64 districts, but it too seems to be having troubles. The youth groups typically every few months organize training programs on prayer and other topics important to Salafi Islam, but the principal said more practical training, such as the use of computers, has been halted for want of funds.

17. (C) Comment: Without further investigation it is difficult to know what to make of the Ahle Hadis movement in Bangladesh -- on the one hand we heard from its adherents repeated vows of non-violence, while on the other hand they remain loyal to a leader who remains in jail on alleged links to terrorism. Nonetheless, its students and youth groups might make a target for U.S. government engagement. English-language training and other vocational skills for Ahle Hadis madrassa students, for example, might better equip them to enter mainstream Bangladeshi universities and, by extension, mainstream national life. The Embassy plans further monitoring to better understand the group.

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